

# **Aspiration and education: Toward new terms of engagement for marginalised students**

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## Aspiration and education: Toward new terms of engagement for marginalised students

Sam Sellar and Trevor Gale<sup>1</sup>

Because teenagers are materialistic, *I've started talking about what things you want to buy and how do you get to that stage*, and you can't get to the brand new [car] or a new house or a trip overseas on the dole, you know.

### Introduction

This strategy, described by a teacher from a school focused on engaging particularly disaffected students, is animated by a key concept for 'third way' politics over the past decade—*aspiration*. In the above account, students' engagement is predicated on identifying what they *want* and appreciating how education can enable them to *own or consume* it. Economic aspirations of this kind, here formulated specifically in terms of consumer desire, are considered to be a potent force for stimulating the broader distribution of goods, including the outcomes of education, through market mechanisms. Given the pervasiveness of this neoliberal logic in education policy over recent decades, it is not surprising to see it channelled in this teacher's attempts to engage students by describing how education offers her students a powerful means to economic ends.

Such economic aspirations have been a prominent issue in Australian political debate over the past decade. During the early 2000s, Mark Latham—former leader of the Australian Parliamentary Labor Party—was a prominent exponent of neoliberal-leaning 'third way' politics. Latham's (2003) policies were influenced by his assessment that 'within the space of a generation, assumptions about ownership, skills and economic mobility have been transformed' (p. 66) and this change has given rise to a group of 'aspirational' voters that constitute a distinctive fraction of the working-class. For Latham, 'the workers have had a taste of economic ownership and, not surprisingly, they want more' (p. 67). Writing specifically on education, he suggested that distributive justice policies limit such aspirations, and in response he drew together neoliberal philosophies and social democratic welfare impulses to develop concepts such as 'aspirational equality', which he argued better acknowledge 'the reality of social mobility, an electorate which wants people to get ahead through their own efforts and enterprise' (Latham, 2001, p. 22). In Latham's account, supporting working-class aspirations for economic assets, as well as helping to create savvy consumers, will help to redress economic inequality by promoting socio-economic mobility and increased access to its concomitant benefits (Latham 2003).

More recently, aspiration has emerged as a prominent concept in both Australian and UK higher education (HE) policies; although, it is generally considered to be lacking among low-socioeconomic status (SES) groups, rather than an available resource that is constrained by overly-interventionist social justice policies. In both systems, HE policy is placing greater responsibility on universities to conduct outreach programs in schools and the wider community, in an effort to improve student engagement and levels of academic achievement (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009; Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008; UK Department for Education & Skills, 2006). In Australia, the most common aim of these programs is to *raise aspirations* for higher education among those from low

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SES backgrounds (Gale, Hattam, Comber, Tranter, Bills, Sellar & Parker, 2010). Raising aspiration is also a primary objective for the UK's national Aimhigher program (Higher Education Funding Council for England, 2009). From this perspective, aspirations for HE appear to be in short supply and in need of stimulus among the same demographic that, in the 'third way' political imaginary, harbour economic aspirations that government must take care not to restrain.

In both instances, discussions of aspiration are characterised by normative evaluation of peoples' attitude towards the future. For example, the apparently 'high' economic and material aspirations of a particular working-class element – the 'aspirationalists' – are judged to provide a desirable and promising impetus for socioeconomic mobility. Whereas, the apparent lack of aspiration for HE is constructed as a problem that requires intervention at the level of government policy and institutional practice, in order to raise apparently 'low' aspirations. Such assessments raise questions about the terms in which people are encouraged to aspire and which are presupposed in their evaluation. We take up these questions in this chapter. The first two sections are 'diagnostic'. They comprise analysis of the discourses of aspiration that are mobilised in discussions of the 'aspirationalist' working class and in policy texts that describe the need to raise aspiration for HE. In the third and fourth sections we analyse focus group data, in which teachers working in tough schools on the suburban fringe of an Australian capital city explore difficult questions about their students' aspirations and engagement with school. These sections move from a diagnosis of how aspiration is predominantly discussed toward consideration of the importance of engaging with peoples' desires for the future in different terms. We propose that conceptions of aspiration currently prevalent in 'third way' political imaginaries and HE policy contexts stand in contrast to a more ethical conception, which holds the potential to make important contributions to our thinking about socially just forms of student engagement with school and university.

### **The aspirational voter in the 'third way' political imaginary**

Since the late 1990s, those designated as 'aspirational voters' have figured prominently in Australian and UK politics. Scalmer (2005) argues that, following its usage by Tony Blair, 'the language of the "aspirationalists" entered Australian political parlance in 1998' when 'conservative [Labour] strategists . . . argued that "aspirationalist" Sydneysiders would reject strongly redistributive policies' (pp. 5-6). Here, the rhetorical function of aspiration as a rallying point for those pursuing more centrist political visions is already apparent. Courting working-class 'aspirationalists' was considered strategically important in the context of reforging Australian Labor Party identity around the conjunction of neo-liberal philosophies and more traditional social democratic impulses; a process initiated by Australian Labor governments in the 1980s and early 1990s (Johnson & Tonkiss, 2002). In the Australian context, the language of aspiration came to be strongly associated with Labor politician and one-time party leader, Mark Latham. Latham's mobilisation of the concept in his arguments concerning economic and education policy provides an instructive 'case' of 'third way' thinking about the 'aspirationalist' demographic.

The discourse of aspiration developed in Latham's essays and speeches has antecedents in UK politics. Relating an anecdote, in which Tony Blair describes how his awareness of the 'aspirationalists' was piqued during an encounter with a self-employed one-time Labour voter, who had switched political preferences due to his perception that Labour policies would prevent him 'getting on',

Johnson (2004) observes that 'one of the strongest Blairite influences on Latham is the key emphasis on attracting aspirational suburban voters' (p. 543). While plenty of ink has been spilled debating the wisdom and merit of electoral strategies premised on winning favour with this group, here we are primarily concerned with how the aspirations of the 'aspirationals' have been represented in Australian political debate, and the role that they played in Latham's thought.

Frequently, discussion of this demographic has positioned them as an upwardly mobile element of the working-class; however, Scalmer (2005) argues that 'none of the categories of traditional class analysis adequately describe the "aspirational" class' (p. 7). Instead, he suggests that this categorisation reflects a familiar pattern of shifting social divisions and apparent mobility producing groups that lie 'in-between' traditional class affiliations. It is difficult to define exactly who the 'aspirationals' are, but this ambivalence increases the political value of the concept:

The very definitional excess that accompanies the term—the incoherent lumping together of consumption, work, attitudes and groupings—is actually an expression of its tactical importance. Like 'the community', 'the people', or 'the battlers', representing the "aspirationals" can be a powerful ideological claim. Political centrality produces discursive abundance. (Scalmer 2005, p. 6)

Indeed, rather than naming any distinctive empirical population, the term perhaps best describes a somewhat ideal 'disposition', constituted at the intersection of consumer desire and neoliberal belief in individual enterprise and entrepreneurialism.

Analysing data collected through the 2005 Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, Goot and Watson (2007) argue similarly that 'aspirationals' are a complex demographic with ambivalent social attitudes and political affiliations. They draw attention to the characteristics of conspicuous consumption and conservative attitudes that are frequently attributed to this group:

Aspirationals are said to have embraced private consumption ahead of public goods—preferring, for example, private schools and private hospitals. This ties in with their propensity to invest, on the stock exchange or in real estate, and with their places of residence in the outer suburbs, where they gravitate to the new, privatised housing estates. . . . On a range of social issues—asylum seekers, migrants, law and order—they are thought to embrace conservative positions. (p. 220)

Goot and Watson (2007) consider whether empirical support exists for such perceptions, analysing different 'aspirational' populations based on three separate definitions: the first uses self-employment as the criteria for being 'aspirational', the second expands this definition to include those who aspire to self-employment, and the third is based on 'orientation'. This third definition includes 'those strongly oriented to getting ahead financially, or those strongly oriented to getting ahead in career terms' (p. 221). This third group is of particular interest here because it is defined as 'aspirational' based on self-identification of a particular disposition, rather than inferring the 'aspirational' character of the group's members from current or desired employment status.

In comparison with middle-class and 'non-aspirational' working-class respondents, this 'aspirationally' oriented group have a number of distinctive characteristics. For example, they are:

- much less likely to have education attainment at the university level (19 per cent) than middle-class respondents (58 per cent), while the non-aspirational working-class have a lower attainment rate again (8 per cent);
- much less likely to own their own home (17 per cent, compared to 40 per cent of both non-aspirational working-class and middle-class respondents);
- more likely to support private schools (28 per cent, compared to 14 per cent of non-aspirational working-class and 19 per cent of middle-class respondents); and
- more likely to have bought a plasma television or home entertainments system in recent years (21 per cent, compared to 14 per cent of non-aspirational working-class and 15 per cent of middle-class respondents). (Goot & Watson 2007)

The differences in levels of educational attainment, as well as attitudes toward education and consumption, are particularly notable. ‘Aspirationals’ who are focused on ‘getting ahead’ have lower levels of university education than middle-class respondents, but place a greater premium on private education, perhaps signalling a desire to increase their accumulation of educational and cultural goods and their belief in the most effective means for doing so. They also appear to place a greater premium on consumer goods, which may serve as overt markers of relative affluence and economic mobility.

Goot and Watson (2007) suggest that ‘when it comes to consumption issues—issues of private over public and of “materialism”—these [aspirational] respondents do appear to be distinctive’ (p. 227). This resonates with Latham’s argument that the pursuit of economic ownership is a distinguishing characteristic of this group. It is also worth noting that those of ‘aspirational’ orientation are significantly more inclined to vote Labor. However, this preference is not evident in the aspirational groups defined by self-employment (either broadly or narrowly). Indeed, Goot and Watson conclude that, overall, ‘neither one sort of aspirational nor the other is particularly distinctive in terms of political attitudes or the way they vote’ (p. 236).

On this analysis, there is some empirical basis for the social attitudes imputed to the ‘aspirational’ demographic, but there is less evidence for their imagined political distinctiveness and electoral importance. Politically, the notion of the ‘aspirational’ appears to serve a primarily rhetorical function as a ‘hinge’ concept that enables acknowledgement of social democratic imperatives while promoting neoliberal market logics as the appropriate means for responding to them. This function is evident in Latham’s (2003) arguments for the Labor Party adopting policy that:

accepts the basic operating principles of a market economy—entrepreneurship and asset accumulation—while pursuing Labor’s traditional goals of universal access and equity. Instead of trying to nationalise or regulate the ownership of assets, our objective should be to increase the size of the tent, to bring in new stakeholders. (p. 70)

Johnson (2004) explains that ‘for Latham the key to unlocking citizen aspirations is economic ownership’ (p. 543). In Latham’s argument, aspirations for economic ownership are an important source of impetus for achieving social justice objectives. This sentiment is echoed in the student engagement strategy described at the outset of this chapter, where desire for economic and

material goods is considered a potential ally in efforts to increase students' access to educational goods. This desire was central to the kind of society Latham sought to foster. His idea was to:

introduce a 'stakeholder' society, an idea that had been pushed strongly by Tony Blair (1996a, 291-322) in the early days of New Labour before being largely dropped, perhaps because it potentially raised ideas of worker or community rights against capital. Latham's conception of stakeholders escapes such dilemmas by constructing them as economic owners in the form of shareholders or investors. (Johnson 2004, p. 545)

Mobilising the discourse of aspiration, Latham sought to reconcile the logic of capital with the kinds of economic redistribution more traditionally associated with the Labor Party.

However, it is important to note certain tensions in Latham's argument. In parallel with his discussions of economic policy, he described an approach to educational policy informed by the notion of 'aspirational equality', which gives emphasis to issues of recognition (Fraser 1995; Young 1990; Gale & Densmore 2000). Latham (2001) proposed that the provision of equal support for people to pursue their diverse aspirations is a more appropriate measure than distributive justice policies that simply aim to bring about equal outcomes. He argued that 'a just society is one in which all individuals and institutions are able to fulfil their potential, according to their own values and aspirations' and 'encourages diverse skills and tolerates diverse outcomes, insofar as people seek these things for themselves' (p. 22). However, despite the nominal intention to recognise different values, the economic imperative at the heart of Latham's argument effectively limits this recognition to *diverse economic aspirations*; that is, aspirations informed by a common desire for the accumulation of assets, but to different degrees or in different forms. From this perspective, desires for the future that are expressed in non-economic terms may appear to 'lack' aspiration.

This brief survey indicates that in the 'third way' political imaginary, as by Latham's arguments, 'aspiration' is understood in primarily economic terms that reflect the influence of neoliberal market logics. Those elements of the working-class with 'high' aspirations to 'get ahead' financially and materially must be encouraged to 'realise their potential' without government interference. Interestingly, Latham argues that the emergence of these 'aspirationals' stems from the education reforms of the Australian Whitlam Labor Government during the 1970s, 'which placed tertiary qualifications within reach of working-class families' (Latham, 2003, p. 66). Increased access to knowledge and skills provided these families with the initial cultural capital that they could convert into economic assets and social mobility. This logic continues to inform current HE policy. However, the problem now appears to be a lack of aspiration for HE and, one can surmise, the economic benefits to which HE provides access. What has caused this apparent shift in levels of aspiration? Or are levels of HE aspiration inconsistent with the levels of more immediately economic aspiration?

### **Raising aspirations: universities and early interventions**

Low levels of aspiration for HE among low SES groups are prominently described as a problem for Australian and UK HE policy. The solution is generally considered to involve universities conducting more frequent and sophisticated outreach activities to *raise aspirations* among this cohort. Clearly, a deficit perception of low SES students and families haunts this logic. As Scalmer (2005) observes, 'aspirationals "aspire", those who are not "aspirationals" are (quite offensively) assumed to lack

such drive' (p. 6). Those who are not 'aspirational' in the HE context are assumed to lack awareness about, and the desire to access, university. However, closer analysis of the discourse of aspiration in HE policy suggests a relationship between the 'problem' of students' and families' 'low aspirations' and the economic aspirations of the nation.

The prevalence of aspiration as a central issue for HE in our current moment is evident in recent Australian and UK HE reports and policies. For example, the 2008 *Review of Australian Higher Education* sets out the problem in bold terms:

Improving access and equity in higher education for these groups [low SES, regional/remote, and Indigenous students] is a difficult task and the solutions that will help to resolve this challenge are not immediately obvious. Barriers to access for such students include their previous attainment, *no awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education and, thus, no aspiration to participate*. (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent & Scales, 2008, p. 27; emphasis added)

Aspiration is also described as a barrier to access in the Australian Government's (Commonwealth of Australia, 2009) response to this Review, which similarly describes the problem as 'low awareness of the long-term benefits of higher education resulting in little aspiration to participate' (p. 13). In response, the Australian Government has made available substantial funding through schemes that are designed to 'create leading practice and competitive pressures to increase the aspirations of low SES students to higher education' (p. 14) and 'to provide schools and vocational education and training providers with links to universities, exposing their students to people, places and opportunities beyond the scope of their own experiences, helping teachers raise the aspirations of their students' (p. 14).

A mix of economic and social agendas underscores this emphasis on 'aspiration raising', even when this objective is described in terms of broadening students' horizons and spreading the social benefits of further education. Increasing HE participation is considered an important strategy for improving and sustaining the nation's competitiveness in a 'global knowledge economy'. The *Review of Australian Higher Education* (Bradley et al. 2008) argues that 'Australia's future will be determined by how well it performs in an economy driven by knowledge-based activities' and that 'the higher education system's performance in producing high-quality graduates and research will be crucial to Australia's long-term productivity and growth outcomes' (p. 88). To this end, the Australian Government holds an 'ambition' to increase levels of HE attainment, setting a target of 40 per cent of all 25 to 34 year olds to hold qualifications at the bachelor level or above by 2025. From this perspective, 'raising aspiration' effectively means stimulating demand for HE and employment in order support national productivity goals.

At the same time, the Government has also set a target for 20 per cent of higher education enrolments at the undergraduate level to be students from low SES backgrounds, reflecting a second 'ambition' to more evenly distribute the benefits of HE. While this could be cynically interpreted as an effort to stimulate demand among groups that have not traditionally accessed HE in large numbers, it does signal social democratic impulses to provide more equitable access to HE and, through the provision of such access, to facilitate economic and social mobility for low SES groups. For example, the Australian Government's (Commonwealth of Australia 2009) vision for HE includes

the creation of 'a fairer Australia' in which 'all Australians will benefit from widespread equitable access to a diverse tertiary sector that allows each individual to develop and reach their potential' (p. 7). Notably, this vision is expressed in language that resonates with Latham's description of 'aspirational equality' and its emphasis on ensuring equal opportunities for entrepreneurialism and individual enterprise.

In the UK context, the need for 'aspiration raising' is even more prevalent in both policy texts and the logic of intervention programs, and is informed by a similar mix of social and economic imperatives. For example, a primary objective of the Higher Education Funding Council for England is 'to stimulate and sustain new sources of demand for HE among under-represented communities and to influence supply accordingly' (p. 18). This has involved the provision of 'funding to Aimhigher, a national programme to widen participation in HE by raising the aspirations and developing the abilities of people from under-represented groups' (p. 19). Further, the UK Government's (2006) *Widening participation in higher education* policy identifies 'raising aspiration' as the second of four strategies for improving access to HE for these groups, and it is replete with references to 'developing' aspirations for and promoting the benefits of HE. Even so, the policy calls for further work to address this issue and for feedback regarding what more can be done 'to help those [from] disadvantaged backgrounds to raise their aspirations and understand that higher education is achievable and worthwhile' (p. 22). As signalled by HEFCE's commitment 'to widening the range and increasing the number of people who take part in HE . . . for both social justice and *economic competitiveness*' (p. 19, emphasis added), aiming higher and appreciating the worth of higher education contributes to the nation's economic interests as well as the individual's.

It is interesting to note a passage from HEFCE's strategic plan, which draws attention to the aspirations of HE institutions (HEI's) and their relationship to national interests: 'although we [the UK] have a strong and diverse HE system, which is respected across the world, the aspirations and goals of the 130 HEI's . . . do not necessarily add up to meeting national or even regional interests' (p. 8). In this case, the potential diversity between institutional and national aspirations is constituted as a 'problem' that policy must address. Similarly, the Australian Government has called for a 'new relationship between Government and higher education institutions' (Commonwealth of Australia 2009, p. 47). This relationship will be based on recognising 'the value of institutional autonomy while promoting excellence, supporting growth and maintaining international competitiveness' (p. 47). To this end, institutions will be required to enter into compacts with the Government in order to 'facilitate alignment of institutional activity with national priorities' (p. 47). Here, the alignment of aspirations is also a policy issue.

These passages from recent HE policies suggest that the aspirations of particular groups of students and families are not simply a problem in their own right. Rather, it is the *incongruence* of aspirations between the three levels of (i) individual students, (ii) institutions and (iii) the nation, which creates cause for concern. For example, central to Latham's argument that distributive justice policies 'constrain' the aspirations of working-class families is a perceived incongruence between individual desire for economic advancement and the social democratic ambitions that have traditionally been associated with the Labor Party in Australia. The 'low aspirations' of students and families from low SES backgrounds reflect their current incongruence with the economic ambitions of the nation, which involve advancing 'the growth of a dynamic knowledge economy' (Commonwealth of

Australia 2009, p. 12) by expanding the HE system. At the same time, the concomitant national ambition to encourage the fairer distribution of educational goods is not necessarily in alignment with the ‘strategic ambitions’ of universities, which may be focused on maintaining the symbolic value and ‘quality’ of their degrees. Some institutions may consider an influx of low SES students to put their academic status at risk. Table 1 provides an example, which is by no means comprehensive, of the different kinds of aspirations that may be evident at the individual, institutional or national level.

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Institutional</b>	<b>National</b>
Economic (ownership, mobility)	Economic (finance, security)	Economic (growth, competition)
Social-Cultural (learning, agency)	Symbolic (distinction, influence)	Social-Political (social inclusion, widening participation)

Table 1: Three levels of aspiration

In this sense, evaluation of the relative ‘height’ of aspiration depends on its congruence with the values that inform the standpoint from which it is evaluated. From a policy perspective, those described as ‘aspirational’ hold economic aspirations that are congruent with national economic policy (or, at least, a particular vision for this policy), while those described as ‘lacking’ aspiration perhaps have desires for their future that are incongruent with national economic interests. While different kinds of aspirations are present at each level, economic aspirations, and the logic of capital that informs them, are common to all.

### **Apathy or aspiration? Explaining the difficulty of engaging students in tough schools**

We turn now to analysis of data collected during discussions with teachers, who arguably have a relatively immediate sense of their students’ thinking about, and preferences for, their futures. The excerpts of teacher discussion analysed here were collected during a nationally-funded research project—*Redesigning Pedagogies in the North*—which was conducted with more than 30 middle-years (upper primary/lower secondary) teachers working in public primary and secondary schools across the outer-suburban fringe of an Australian capital city.<sup>2</sup> The communities served by these schools are located in a region that Thomson (2002) has described as a ‘rustbelt’: an area in which the post-industrial exodus of manufacturing industries during the mid to late twentieth century

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<sup>2</sup> Led by a research team from the Centre for Studies in Literacy, Policy and Learning Cultures (University of South Australia), RPiN was funded by the Australian Research Council (LP0454869) as a linkage project with industry partners: the Northern Adelaide State Secondary Principals Network; the Australian Education Union (SA Branch); and the South Australian Social Inclusion Unit. Chief Investigators included Robert Hattam, Phillip Cormack, Barbara Comber, Marie Brennan, Lew Zipin, Alan Reid, Kathy Paige, David Lloyd, Helen Nixon, Bill Lucas, John Walsh, Faye McCallum and Brenton Prosser, with assistance from Kathy Brady, Philippa Milroy and Sam Sellar.

produced a 'combination of a concentration of loss of employment and its long-term effects on particular people' (p. 26). Many of the schools in these communities are renowned for being difficult places to teach and learn.

This discussion took place during one of a series of three reference groups, in which a small group of teachers explored possibilities and challenges for socially just teaching in this particular region. While similar in structure to focus groups, the reference groups differed in that they positioned teachers as 'co-theorists' of pedagogy. Through interlocution with each other and the researcher, teachers extended from prompts to analyse their pedagogies and their experience working in these schools. Prompting the particular discussion analysed in this chapter was the question of what changes had occurred during their time teaching in this region, and what impact these changes, or perhaps broader social changes, may have had on their pedagogies.

After some general conversation—about changing social attitudes, poverty related issues specific to this area and the effect of both on classroom dynamics—one of the teachers, Sophie,<sup>3</sup> raised the question of what causes the significant levels of student disengagement evident in these schools: 'Is it apathy or *is it that the students are not aspirational?* This initiated some discussion about whether it is one or the other, or a combination of both. Sophie then continued her line of inquiry, suggesting that one cause for low aspirations is multi-generational unemployment and the fewer experiences that many families have with post-school educational and occupational pathways as a result. While this is certainly an issue in this region, Megan, who teaches primary school, argues that her students *are* aspirational. However, she notes that low levels of academic achievement significantly reduce the likelihood of these aspirations being realised:

I still have them while they're young so they still have these . . . *they are aspirational*. One of my girls, to one of my more disruptive boys, turned around and she said, 'Well you're the loser because I'm smart and I'm going to be rich, and you're just going to sit around annoying people for the rest of your life' . . . but the issue is that they say to me 'I want to be a lawyer, I want to be a doctor, I want to be a vet', and you just look at their literacy and you go, 'This is not going to happen for you' . . . So now I talk about, I don't talk about 'What do you want to be?', I say 'What sort of thing are you thinking of doing, like working with animals, working with kids, building with your hands?' (Megan, emphasis added)

It is worth noting how the student in this account describes her aspirations in terms of economic advancement—becoming 'rich'—in contrast to the lack of mobility implied in 'sitting around for the rest of your life'. Further, Megan describes a range of professions to which her students aspire, all of which require HE. Contrary to representations of these students as lacking aspiration, she describes how they hold relatively high aspirations, although they are not yet able to articulate the role of HE in attaining them. Yet, in Megan's assessment, these aspirations often appear 'unrealistic'. She explains how she counsels students to consider occupations in their field of interest that may be more 'realistic', effectively mediating their aspirations toward 'lower' horizons. For example, one

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<sup>3</sup> Teachers in the study have been assigned a pseudonym.

could work with animals as a veterinary nurse rather than as a veterinarian, thereby circumventing the need for a university qualification.

This 'mediational' strategy appears to harbour a form of deficit thinking, which Megan quickly moves to counter:

I might just want to backtrack and qualify, when I was saying they want to be all these professions and you look at their literacy and you say 'It can't happen', I mean it can't happen for them in the immediate future. It may be that they go back and do it as mature age students etcetera, but it's that, um, you know, that's always possible, but at some stage they're going to have a realisation, and then the danger is they say then 'Oh well I'm just giving up'. (Megan)

Rather than simply 'lowering' her students' aspirations in a straightforward manner, Megan describes how she attempts to negotiate a difficult ethical tension. Given that many students in these schools experience educational disadvantage, she must decide between providing naive support for her students 'high' aspirations, thereby creating the conditions for disengagement if these prove unobtainable, or encouraging students to 'lower' their aspirations to occupations that may enable them to work in their area of interest, although perhaps in roles that attract lower status and remuneration.

Later in the discussion, Sophie reiterates this risk of students 'giving up' if they realise that school won't provide them with access to their preferred future: 'What we've got is lots of kids who are outside [the cohort of students who successfully navigate formal education] looking in, saying "I want to get there, but I don't know how so I'm going to give up"'. In response, Megan pursues a different explanation for why these students disengage with school, which departs from her previous emphasis on low levels of academic achievement:

Maybe some of them don't want to . . . Maybe that's the issue, maybe what's happening is that because we are such middle-class people, and the way that we measure success is materialistic, you know, you've got a nice big house, you drive a fancy car, you've got a massive mortgage, 'Well you're doing really well there!' Maybe it's just that, and maybe it's not, but that they're choosing that that's not how they want to be measured, and that's not as important to them as it is to us. Maybe we are just saying 'This is what's important because that's how we live', but it's not how they feel they need to live. (Megan)

This raises another difficult question about whether aspirations can be normatively evaluated according to values that may be specific to a particular class. Can we talk about 'high' and 'low' aspirations in universal terms—as much current policy appears to do—if this assessment is always made from a particular class and cultural standpoint?

### **Beyond economic discourses of aspiration?**

This introduces a new dimension into the discussion: the possibility that aspirations are inherently related to culturally specific values, and that these values demand a complex *politics of recognition* rather than normative evaluations that prioritise questions of redistribution (e.g. Latham's emphasis

on economic ownership). Of course, this is not to say that people living in poverty do not aspire to more dignified and secure material conditions, or to the various freedoms that economic security affords. Rather, we must consider whether economic security should be made to depend on subscription to a particular set of middle-class values and strategies.

Reflecting on ethnographic work with the poor in Mumbai, Appadurai (2004) argues for this approach to conceiving of aspiration as a *cultural capacity*. For Appadurai, the concept of aspiration denotes a cultural relationship to the future that is generally obscured by the language of economics, which he argues has become the default 'science of the future' (p. 60). Indeed, discussion of aspiration in the policies analysed here is almost exclusively framed in economic terms: growth, ownership, productivity, competitiveness, human capital. In the context of neoliberalism, this economic view emphasises the wants and choices of individuals. However, contrary to this assumption, Appadurai proposes that 'aspirations form parts of wider ethical and metaphysical ideas which derive from larger cultural norms' (p. 67). Further, he argues that:

Poverty is partly a matter of operating with extremely weak resources where the terms of recognition are concerned . . . the poor are frequently in a position where they are encouraged to subscribe to norms whose social effect is to further diminish their dignity, exacerbate their inequality, and deepen their lack of access to material goods and services. (p. 66)

Perhaps most obvious among these norms, at least in the context of the present analysis, is the neoliberal belief in economic growth and consumer desire as the key to increasing wealth and reducing poverty. This belief does not, however, account for the increasing disparity between capital and labour, and between rich and poor, that capitalist economic growth has generally produced (Wallerstein, 1998; Gale, 2005). As Bauman (2005) suggests, 'while the poor get poorer, the very rich—those paragons of consumer virtues—get richer still' (p. 41). He continues: 'the poorer the poor, the higher and more whimsical are the patterns of life set in front of their eyes to adore, covet and wish to emulate' (p. 41). The plasma television, which 21 per cent of 'aspirationalists' (compared to 14 per cent of the non-aspirational working class and 15 per cent of middle-class respondents) have recently purchased (Goot & Watson 2007), is perhaps a potent symbol of the influence that consumer values have on aspirations and perceptions of social status.

Indeed, another teacher, Brad, continued to explore the difficult question of how to understand the aspirations of others across class differences. In Brad's case, this difference has arisen due to his socioeconomic mobility as a result of becoming a teacher. Brad has lived in this particular outer-suburban region for much of his life, and has worked in low-pay, low-status jobs prior to entering the teaching profession. He recalls his wife explaining to him that his improved economic position potentially undermines his ability to relate with the experiences and values of some students in his class. Most notably, the signifier of his newly acquired middle-class status is a plasma television:

"Yah, yah, Brad, you've played the hard life and you've done this and you've done that, and you think you're going to be at one with the kids' she said, 'but you come home and you still watch a *plasma telly*' . . . I don't want to call myself middle-class, but by definition I have to be, and I still haven't got the grind, I know for every fortnight, and this is terrible, I'm going to get paid, and bloody well . . . They're still seeing me as a

teacher that's, you know, all these holidays, I'm well-off, you know . . . but do I really know what it's like to be living there? (Brad)

While the difficulty of understanding the cultural values according to which the aspirations of others are formed and pursued is reiterated here, it is important not to overstate this cultural difference, or to draw lines between 'cultures' that are too neat (Benhabib, 2002). As Appadurai (2004) cautions, 'there may not be anything which can usefully be called a "culture of poverty" (anthropologists have rightly ceased to use this conceptualization), but the poor certainly have understandings of themselves and the world that have cultural dimensions and expressions' (p. 65). While it is entirely inappropriate to suggest that those from less affluent backgrounds should not aspire to improved economic and material circumstances, it is important to consider whether conceiving of aspiration in predominantly economic terms, characterised in our current times by neoliberal ideologies and consumer values, establishes a normative context, underpinned by the logic of capital, in which the objects of 'high' aspiration are only ever available to the relatively few. As Bauman (2005) explains, poverty is not just a material condition but also 'means being excluded from whatever passes for a "normal life"', and 'in a consumer society, a "normal life" is the life of consumers' (p. 38). The question is whether 'high' aspirations, conceived in these terms, actually undermine the possibilities for creating more just social and economic conditions.

The pervasiveness of consumer logic as the framework in which aspirations are currently formed is exemplified in a statement that concluded this passage of teacher discussion, and which prefaces this chapter. Referring to Megan's strategy of mediating aspirations by discussing what students 'want to do', in contrast to 'what they want to be', Sophie proposes a different strategy, which involves discussion of what students wish to *buy*:

You talk about what things you want to do, rather than what you want to be. I've started talking about, because teenagers are materialistic, I've started talking about what things do you want to buy . . . and how do you get to that stage, and you can't to the brand new [car] or a new house, or a trip overseas, on the dole, you know you can't get to that . . . and we started talking about in terms [of] materialistically. (Sophie)

In response, Megan observes that 'it's a bit of a scary thing if you have to inspire them with materialistic observations'. At the very least, it reinforces cultural norms that narrow the possibilities of what it might mean to 'aspire' and, in doing so, create the conditions for some to be excluded from a 'normal' life. While not wishing to undermine the intent of Sophie's pedagogical experiment, which is driven chiefly by the desire to engage students, we must consider what injustice is done when 'high' aspirations are premised on levels of consumption and economic ownership that can only ever be available to a few.

## **Conclusion**

A feature common to each of the contexts examined here is the *representation* of others' aspirations. In each instance those whose aspirations are the object of scrutiny—'aspirational voters', students that lack aspiration, or those whose aspirations potentially diverge from middle-class values—are absent from the discussion. Indeed, it seems likely that most people would not describe themselves as having 'low' aspirations. Rather, this evaluation is more likely to be

attributed to people by others with incongruent values and desires. Of course, whether or not this is the case is a matter for empirical research, which we argue offers strong possibilities for extending thinking about aspiration beyond economic frameworks (and the neoliberal logic that currently animates them) and beyond a discourse that represents and evaluates the aspirations of others in dominant terms.

Appadurai (2006) argues that research, when understood as ‘the capacity to systematically increase the horizons of one’s current knowledge, in relation to some task, goal or aspiration’ (p. 176), plays a fundamental role in peoples’ pursuit of their preferred futures: ‘without systematic tools for gaining relevant new knowledge, aspiration degenerates into fantasy or despair’ (pp. 176-177). This is the dilemma that Megan raised when she described her attempts to mediate between these two undesirable outcomes. Following Appadurai’s argument, research into aspirations is perhaps best conducted by aspirants themselves or, at the very least, with these aspirants. In school contexts, this research could be pursued through curriculum units in which aspirations, and the rich networks of cultural values and norms that influence them, constitute topics for inquiry and dialogue. Work of this kind would enable teachers’ to explore, *with their students*, the role that class and cultural values play in the development and pursuit of their aspirations, while also engaging in sustained and critical curriculum conversations about the dominant norms to which the less powerful are encouraged to subscribe. While this is not the place, and we are without space, to provide more detailed consideration of exactly what form such curricular inquiry into aspirations might take, we suggest that the work of Moll, Gonzalez and colleagues (Gonzalez, Moll & Amanti 2005; Moll, Amanti, Neffe & Gonzalez 1992) provides instructive examples of how to research the cultural knowledge embedded in students’ homes and community lives, in order to draw on this knowledge as a resource for curriculum design and classroom conversation.

Those who are variously described as either ‘aspirational’ or lacking aspiration, while not homogenous by any means, generally occupy less powerful social and economic positions. However, they have at times exerted substantial political agency. As Scalmer (2005) explains, ‘those who dwell ‘in-between’ [traditional class divisions] have often contributed to radical political change. Perhaps, if those dubbed the ‘aspirational’ are ever allowed to find their own voices, this may happen once more (p. 9). This is our hope in proposing critical curriculum work that engages students in researching and representing their own desires for the future and the cultural contexts that shape them.

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